

TB Research Advisory Committee (TRAC): a network of researchers, decision makers and disease control workers in Ethiopia

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Research is a tool for development. Most research in resource limited settings is fragmented and often donor-driven. It is very important to ensure that health research complies with national priorities and addresses operational needs of disease control. Sustainable health research requires close collaboration among national researchers whose work complements individual focus areas and pools local resources reducing dependence on outside support.

TB control is a national priority in Ethiopia. The case detection rate has remained low despite tremendous efforts in expanding DOTS throughout the country. The diagnostic tools currently available are not adequately sensitive. Operational limitations for accessing TB care are additional drawbacks documented from client surveys.

On the other hand, there are research data from Ethiopia that could potentially improve the diagnostic sensitivity of tests such as improving the performance of smear microscopy using bleach. These have not been put into practice in TB control yet. It is a waste of valuable resource if research results are not utilized in disease control.

The Federal Ministry of Health TB and Leprosy Control program established a TB Research Advisory Committee (TRAC) composed of research institutes (Armaeur Hansen Research Institute, and the Ethiopian Health and Nutrition Research Institute) and national universities (Addis Ababa, Gondar and Jimma), HAPCO and ESTA to assist it in strengthening operational research that would improve TB control efforts in the country. Since its establishment in 2001 TRAC has organized four national workshops on TB research (2002, 2004, 2006 and 2008) where Federal and Regional TB control managers, regional laboratory staff, TB researchers and academicians have come together to assess national and regional progress in TB control,

and discuss new data from research on TB and TB/HIV control in Ethiopia,. At the third and fourth national conferences in 2006 and 2008, a total of 21 and 24 scientific papers were presented, a number of them for the first time. TRAC also encourages presentation of project proposals for discussion and peer input. The main outcome of the conferences has been to identify major operational challenges in TB control and set current research priorities. The conferences have recommended next steps towards the application of research output into practice. TB experts from African countries have been invited to these meetings in order to learn from their experiences and compare progress. These included invited guests from Sudan, Kenya, Tanzania and South Africa, among others.

TRAC has also organized and sponsored short course training in field research methods and epidemiology targeting health workers within the Ministry of Health and postgraduate students who will work in the new universities. These courses have been given every year since 2001 to an average of 15 -20 trainees (physicians, health officers, laboratory technologists or other professionals from the regions and Addis Ababa) per year. In the last three years alone, TRAC has trained 96 professionals in operational research methodology. These were 42 (in two rounds) in 2006, 20 in 2007 and 34 in 2008. The TRAC trainees are selected by the Federal MoH TB and Leprosy control program in consultation with AHRI.

Another interesting activity of TRAC is the initiative for developing a resource center to assist in the dissemination of study findings, training and reading materials on TB control to physicians and other health workers with poor access to such information.

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TRAC and proven to be a very useful instrument to promote close collaboration among TB workers in both control and research areas, including even those working in related sectors such as animal health.

The activities of TRAC have so far been conducted by AHRI, chair of the Committee, in consultation with the Federal TB and Leprosy Control program (the Secretariat). Funds for the workshops and short courses have been secured from various sources including WHO/TDR (2001), EDCTP (2006), JHU-

TSEHAI and WHO-ET (2008). The field research methodology training course in 2008 was fully sponsored by the Federal TB and Leprosy Control team through the Global Fund. AHRI has covered the expenses of both national conferences and short courses in the years when other sources were not available.

It is important that this network is integrated in the functions of the Ministry of Health TB Control program as a tool to promote operational research and translation of research in TB control practices nationwide.